

WAR

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Civil War" will make you shed them.

"Ken Burns, in making this film, decided that the closer he got to the truth, the better the program was going to be," said writer Shelby Foote, the on-screen commentator whom Burns called the series' "presiding spirit."

Foote, whose three-volume "The Civil War: A Narrative" is a definitive classic, said Burns submitted his first script to dozens of historians, who met around a big table in Washington, D.C.

"We went through the script page by page," Foote said. "No matter how high a value Ken himself had placed on a particular event... if someone said, 'I'm sorry, there's considerable doubt this ever happened,' he was invariably willing to let it go."

Foote is a brilliant writer and his commentary — most of it from a single, incredible interview — brings humor, insight and a profound compassion to the series. It's to be hoped the series will win him a much wider audience.

Burns' project led him, his brother and co-producer Ric Burns, and their co-writer, Geoffrey C. Ward, to more than 80 museums and libraries. More than 16,000 period photos, paintings, lithographs, broadsides and newspapers were filmed.

They also compiled tactical maps and contemporary footage of the great battle sites. "We went to the battlefields at the same time of day and year as the battles, with a sort of reverence," Burns said.

For the soundtrack, they recorded authentic cannon and musket fire. If bird songs were heard at the dawn of battle, "we made sure that they were the right bird songs," Burns said.

They distilled the series from more than 150 hours of film, nearly 500 hours of sound, music and effects, dozens of interviews and 2,500 first-person quotations. The project took five years to complete.

What's startling about "The Civil War" is that with no moving images other than newsreel footage of elderly veterans, the action is terrific. The lushly detailed, fine-grained photographs allowed for spectacular camerawork.

"We had faith in the photographs that they were once alive," Burns said. "We looked at them the way a Hollywood director might look at a long shot, a medium shot or a closeup. And then we tried to make a descriptive story."

Burns shows us the indelible faces of the war, luminous and haunting. There are Lincoln's eyes, mournful, bruised and deep-set, and the burning eyes of Gen. "Stonewall" Jackson.

And there is the ruined ash heap of what once was Richmond, Va., crushed under Union bombardments; and there, heaven help us, lie the dead of battles like Shiloh, Antietam, and Gettysburg, immortalized on glass-plate negatives.

Burns' Homeric design brings the war and its players to life. As he put it: "We get to know what the spear carriers are thinking, in addition to what the generals, the gods, are thinking."

We meet them through their writings, speeches, military dispatches, diaries and letters, read by a chorus of many distinctive voices: Sam Waterston as Abraham Lincoln, Morgan Freeman as Frederic Douglass, Garrison Keillor as Walt Whitman and playwright Arthur Miller as William T. Sherman.

We meet "spear carriers," Pvt. Sam Watkins of the 1st Tennessee and Pvt. Elisha Hunt Rhodes of the 2nd Rhode Island, two young men, very much of their times, whose diaries recorded what they saw and felt and how they changed.

In the series, narrated by David McCullough, we also encounter civilian diarists Mary Chesnut of Montgomery, a sensitive and compassionate woman, and George Templeton Strong, a prosperous, naughty New Yorker (charmingly read by George Plimpton).

"The Civil War" also is a long-overdue account of the little-heralded role of black troops in the war. Though less than 1 percent of the North's population, blacks were nearly one-tenth of the Union army by war's end; of those eligible to serve, 85 percent signed on; 180,000 wore Union blue.

The series is much more than a narrowly accurate history of the major battles and campaigns of the war. It is a story of the political, social and economic forces that tore a nation apart, then reunited it under the sword.

Burns, who's a hit over wherever the huge and enthusiastic critical acclaim his series already has received, said he hopes only that his documentary gets seen by American audiences.

"Too often, we've allowed the history of what we've done to be told by others," he said. "It's really time that we learn how to tell our own story. I'm hoping that as a country, we might wonder on Roseanne for one week if we're off on 'Costly' and waste this great national story together after all the years of great national family trauma."

Both local PBS stations will run "The Civil War" this week, but on different nights and times. KUED Ch. 7 begins Sunday at 8 p.m. and Thursday, each installment beginning at 7 p.m. KATV Ch. 13 begins Monday and concludes Friday, with installment beginning at 8 p.m.

In addition, Ch. 7 will air "The Civil War: The Smoky Mountain" Sunday at 9 p.m. and Tuesday at 9:30 p.m. and "The Smoky Mountain: Ken Burns' In Conversation" on Monday at 9:30 p.m.